

The Programmatic Era: Creative Writing as Cultural Imperialism

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Abstract: In recent years, creative writing has spread far beyond its origins in the Anglophone higher education institutions of the Global North. This essay positions Mark McGurl’s much-lauded *The Program Era* in the global(-ized) arena and asks how, why, and to what end the creative writing program might influence global literary production, given the cultural and historical particularity of its teaching models and craft devices. The essay moves beyond a discourse on pedagogy to draw on wider debates around cultural and linguistic imperialism as well as literary production in the global marketplace. It uses the key example of the subject’s recent expansion into China and focuses on the “workshop model,” writing anthologies, and “plot” as it is articulated in canonical writing guides. The essay argues that the subject must better articulate its historical and cultural particularities. If it does not, it risks enacting a form of cultural imperialism on the production of future world literatures and limiting the potential for experimental writing in a globalizing world.

Keywords: creative writing, globalization, cultural imperialism, linguistic imperialism, global literary marketplace, orality, China

I. Introduction

In *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl argues that creative writing (henceforth CW) programs in the United States have had “the single most determining influence on postwar American literary production” (38). He notes “the high degree of partiality” in many of the subject’s craft devices (133). McGurl does

not claim that post-war era CW programs invented craft devices such as “show-don’t-tell” and finely tuned points of view along the Henry James model but instead suggests that they “codified” and “disseminated” them to “unprecedented numbers of students” (“Letter” 8). I suggest that this codification had (and has) the result of turning such craft devices into universal truths rather than the historically and culturally specific options they actually are.

I contend that CW’s current global expansion and relative lack of cultural and historical self-awareness threatens to unfold a new form of cultural imperialist hegemony, whereby the allure and widespread practice of writing students utilizing seemingly universal craft devices in fact restricts literary production and experimentation. As Graham Huggan (among others) shows, the glamour of the market, with its Booker Prizes and J. K. Rowling-level fame and fortune, augments this allure (105–19). McGurl suggests that “[w]hat is needed now . . . are studies that take the rise and spread of the creative writing program . . . as an established fact in need of historical interpretation: how, why, and to what end has the writing program reorganized U.S. literary production in the postwar period?” (*Program* 27). Expansive though they may seem, these questions are limited by their narrow cultural frame. Instead, I want to ask how, why, and to what end the CW program might influence *global* literary production, given its rapid spread and its origins and codified craft devices born in the English studies programs of the late nineteenth- and early to mid-twentieth-century American academy. These are not questions with answers as yet—the process is too new. Instead, I want to try to begin to articulate the issues.

To do this, I draw on wider debates around globalization, cultural and linguistic imperialism, and literary production and the global literary marketplace. I focus largely on the key example of CW programs recently developed in China to show how such faux universalisms take root. I analyze the cultural particularity of craft through the key example of “plot.” CW is less concerned with issues of content or subject matter than it is with those of form. Franco Moretti set out to research the development of the novel beyond the Western European “core.” “Four continents, two hundred years, over twenty independent critical stud-

ies,” he writes, “and they all agreed: when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s *always* as a compromise between *foreign form* and *local materials*’ (“Conjectures” 60; emphasis added). My focus differs from the majority of critical work on world literatures thus far in that I concentrate solely on such forms rather than materials (or content).

A few words to summarize my argument and elaborate on my use of the terms “globalization,” “hegemony,” and “imperialism”: Stuart Hall describes globalization as “a hegemonizing process in the proper Gramscian sense.” For my purposes it is a neo-imperialist enterprise. As CW expands around the world—bringing with it very particular cultural and historical concepts of writing craft and the allure of the literary market—a subject that prides itself on free creative expression in fact risks enacting a form of cultural imperialism on such expression. In so doing, it may reduce or homogenize the creative milieu as well as the range of formal, stylistic, and genre-related opportunities for writers in a global literary environment. It threatens to hegemonize certain literary forms and craft devices at the expense of investigating other storytelling and creative literary forms it might encounter if its eyes were more open. This essay feeds the wider discourse on “new imperialisms” by offering a specific example of how an ill-articulated globalizing process can threaten cultural diversity. The differences between the new and old imperialisms are beyond this essay’s remit. New imperialisms are bound up in massive and complex global shifts, of course, that I can only touch on here.

II. Workshop and Craft¹

The University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop (IWW) is CW’s “Eve,” the ur-program from which (virtually) all others evolved (McGurl; Myers, *Elephant*; Dawson).² When I recently asked Professor Josef Haslinger, the director of Leipzig University’s German-language CW school, the Deutsches Literaturinstitut, if their teaching was influenced by the “Iowa model,” he replied: “It is all Iowa!” Whether ironic or accurate in its assessment, his comment indicates Iowa’s conceptual prevalence within CW circles. Although significant literature already exists on the nature of the “Iowa model,” that model’s articulation nonetheless forms an important staging post in the trajectory of my argument.

The IWW opened in 1936, offering—as it does to this day—a Master of Fine Arts in English: literary production conducted through the lens of English studies. CW originated in the constructivist, democratic free expression of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American academic English studies, which foregrounded continuing literary production rather than merely analytical study of existing texts. Over the following forty odd years, Harvard's composition studies modules, with their peer-review workshop tuition model, led to the teaching methods used by IWW. The workshop peer-review model, which was born in the particular context of progressive liberal American academic notions of freedom of expression, swiftly became central to CW pedagogy. Anna Leahy suggests that if CW must have a “signature pedagogy . . . that signature is the workshop” (65). For Diane Donnelly, “when one speaks of the pedagogy of creative writing . . . the workshop is implied in the address” (5). Donnelly suggests that “[t]he emergence of the workshop as an independent entity, or academic specialisation, at the graduate level, leading to the award of an MFA, is the point at which Creative Writing becomes a discipline” (49). Norman Foerster began offering creative M.A. theses at Iowa upon his arrival in 1930 as director of the University's School of Letters: “This innovative practice lead [sic] to the founding of the Iowa Writer's Workshop” (Vanderslice 66). Foerster, who later became a leading exponent of New Criticism, saw CW as criticism's “natural ally. . . . Creative writing was an effort at critical understanding conducted from within the conditions of literary practice” (Myers, *The Elephants* 128, 133).

The new discipline of CW used New Critical approaches to peer-review criticism within a workshop environment. For Dawson, CW “craft” remains to this day “the conjunction of formalist criticism with the concept of artistic training associated with the fine arts” (49).³ “Craft,” Tim Mayers writes, “is probably one of the central concepts—if not the central concept—within professional discourses of creative writing” (65). The contained aesthetic object (the produced creative text) in New Critical/formalist criticism is reviewed for its form and structure rather than its cultural or social meaning or value—that is, its content. A very particular version emerges, then, of what creative authorship and

practice came to mean in academic CW programs: a focus on academic rigor and meticulous research; a wide reading of the canon as substance for one's creative material and supporting critical craft; and a consideration of that craft as technique, with certain "devices" derived from English literary studies written into practical guides. (Dawson considers it best to conceive of craft "as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse" to enable a sense of contestation for that intervention in the "discourse" of literary production [211].) The peer review workshop model uses these craft devices in its New Critical close readings of works as contained aesthetic objects.

Eric Bennett's excellent work on CW and the Cold War-era American university provides an illuminating overview of the ways in which the US government (including the CIA) and, particularly, The Rockefeller Foundation funded and assisted the development of both national and international CW programs. David H. Stevens, an English professor from the University of Chicago, was in charge of The Rockefeller Foundation's Humanities Division from 1932 to 1949. He was interested in the role of the writer in society and, in 1945, planned to "seed the Midwest with creative writing programs" (Bennett 380). In the years to come, the Foundation "underwrote creative writing on a much grander scale, starting in 1953, giving a three-year grant of \$40,000 to the Iowa Writer's Workshop[,] . . . enough . . . to transform Iowa into the national bellwether that it soon became" (Bennett 380). IWW director (1941–67) Paul Engle and Stanford's Wallace Stegner received direct sponsorship from The Rockefeller Foundation for their international activities. Both travelled to Asia in the 1950s to speak, and Stegner's *Pacific Spectator*—"a journal where the literature of the American West and the Far East mingled" (Bennett 381)—was funded in part by the Foundation (as were the *Kenyon Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and other literary review journals). For three decades, sponsored by The Rockefeller Foundation, Engle undertook

fundraising pitches that invoked the threat of Communism and described how creative writing programs created for artists a politically hygienic refuge from bohemia—from the ideo-

logically suspect urban centres where the literati, at least until 1939, had mingled with Communists and shared the spirit of the Popular Front. After the war, full of Hemingway-bedazzled veterans, the Workshop cleansed the writing life of the taint of pink or red affiliations. (Bennett 381)

Engle's International Writing Program at Iowa, which was launched in 1967, was supported by the US State Department and the CIA, despite his later suggestion that it was a spontaneous creation of the mid-1960s. "In fact," Bennett writes, "the international program merely continued and purified the financial and ideological dynamic of the Writers' Workshop of the 1950s" (382). The Iowa model, then, from which virtually all CW programs have followed, carries with it significant cultural, historical, and political baggage.

The 1960s saw the next dramatic rise in CW graduate programs. Stephen Wilbers notes that "[m]any of these programs were founded, directed and staffed by Iowa Workshop graduates" (105).⁴ In 1967, IWW graduate and instructor R. V. Cassill (along with author and CW academic George Garrett) founded the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, CW's first and largest professional organization. The Iowa model had a direct and overwhelming effect on the development of British (Wandor, *Author* 1–23), Canadian (McWhirter 101), and Australian and New Zealand CW programs (Krauth *passim*). Its expansion to virtual ubiquity in these countries in recent years hardly requires elaboration. The model was Iowa's, and that model was informed by constructivist freedom of personal expression, which is constrained by very particular New Critical approaches to textual analysis and canonical comprehension that were devised in the social, political, and cultural milieu of the Cold War.

McGurl notes how CW incorporated the anthology textbook, which typically consists of creative work "along with suggestions for further study and editorial commentary, commentary very much along the lines of the New Critical approach of close reading" (*Program* 133), into its pedagogical model. This adoption inevitably led to the canonization of certain texts over others as well as a particular type of technical craft

style. McGurl terms this a “circulating aesthetic institution” (132) that esteems impersonality, “limitation,” the fine-honing of prose in brutally defined and rigidly maintained points of view (after James), and a stress on “show don’t tell” that has arguably become “the dominant aesthetic style of post-modernist fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (132). Iowa graduate Flannery O’Connor, perennial anthology textbook and CW course favorite, may be the exemplar of this style with her austere prose and strict adherence to third-person limited point of view. In her article “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!” Bharati Mukherjee notes a contemporary fixation on the type of writing exemplified by CW program graduates and attendees such as O’Connor and “gritty realist” Raymond Carver (29). They bear little resemblance to the rich prose styles or “maximalism” that Mukherjee suggests may be offered by “immigrant writing.” At best, McGurl states, in recent years “the autopoietic processing of experience as creative writing cashes out, in the literary marketplace, as a *dialectic* of ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ narrative forms” (*Program* 286; emphasis added).

Surely the CW Program model I describe is long superseded? I suggest not. CW has risked becoming “soft, fat and sassy with its success,” Joseph Moxley writes, “providing a haven from academic challenge and . . . intellectual rigour” for its writing tutors (253). Jed Rasula argues that, through its refusal to interrogate its origins, CW remains in a “pre-postmodern” context; CW programs “have doggedly claimed diplomatic immunity from disciplinary reconfiguration. The cost, however, is . . . intellectual xenophobia” (419). My issue lies not so much with the particularities of this claimed diplomatic immunity⁵ as with the potential for cultural hegemony that such a lack of critical engagement threatens as the subject expands. In recent times, as Bennett notes, “a writer comes from the Bronx or Bangladesh, from Haiti or Halifax, and speaks for his or her region. The demographic pluralism takes the pressure off formal experimentation and allows for the standardization of form” (390). CW positions itself as a model or at least a learning environment for writing creatively that works anywhere and everywhere, as we shall see in my exploration of the Chinese example. The model has been predominant in CW’s evolution in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia and

New Zealand. I want to ask: What of the subject as it has travelled beyond? First, however, let us turn to craft.

III. Losing the Plot

“Every time I receive a new writing book in the mail, or read a review of one,” observes Jeri Kroll, former Chair of the Australian Association of Writers Program, “a stale aroma rises from the pages” (174). In three recent studies on practical CW guides, Steve Evans and Jeri Kroll, Micheline Wandor, and Steve Westbrook note a failure or reluctance to engage with theory and air the writer’s preconceptions and assumptions as well as an uncritical focus on craft. In this section I focus on one specific craft device ubiquitous to practical guides on prose fiction and dramatic writing.

Plot has tended to travel two (often connected) paths in CW: 1) universal “monomythic” paradigms (exemplified in Joseph Campbell’s and, later, Christopher Vogler’s work), and 2) the Aristotelian three- (or more) act model (developed by Robert McKee, Syd Field, and Gustav Freytag, among numerous others). John Yorke writes that “[s]torytelling has a shape. It determines the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginning of the recorded word. It’s a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it’s a shape that may be—though we must be careful—a universal archetype” (xi). Unfortunately, Yorke proves far from careful, not least in his leap from Eurocentric Renaissance history to a universal “beginning of the recorded word.” Yorke “read everything on storytelling . . . [and] there was one unifying factor. . . . [T]hey all shared the same underlying structural traits. . . . [T]he three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal” (xiii). He explores the Romans, nineteenth-century French dramatists, Shakespeare, and Jonson, and contends that “if there really was an archetype, it had to apply . . . to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all” (xiii). His became a “historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling” (xiv)—although evidently not an anthropological journey. He is ensconced in his own cultural paradigms—

Rome, France, Shakespeare—but nonetheless makes an unstudied hop to the universal. Yorke’s “journey” into storytelling leads him to realize that story “is simply a logical beat-by-beat progression from A to B via a *symmetrical arc*. It’s a *natural shape*. It occurs . . . unconsciously, which is why it appears both in *Beowulf* and *Jaws* . . . a *natural* by-product of how we order the world” (226; emphasis added). Yorke misses the point that *Beowulf* has participated directly in the construction of a narrative tradition of which *Jaws* plays a part, certainly since its popular re-emergence in the early twentieth century.⁶ As Chris Jones describes, “*Beowulf* continues to have cultural ‘use’ . . . across three millennia, and . . . Anglo-Saxon poetry continues to be productive in contemporary imagination” (14). J. R. R. Tolkien is merely the most obvious example: “Anglo-Saxon England,” Maria Artamonova explains, “was always at the background of Tolkien’s mythology” (73).⁷ Yorke’s naturalizing yet ethnocentric cultural expression of universality requires that *Jaws* and *Beowulf* be unrelated.

Let me provide an example of an alternative narrative structure to illustrate Yorke’s limited cultural and historical perspective. In 2005, British filmmaker Sue Clayton was invited to collaborate on a screenplay in Bhutan. Clayton, along with a Bhutanese filmmaker, a producer, and an actor, devised a storyline in which Ellis, an American Information Technology expert providing consultation on a Bhutanese satellite station, decides to climb Mount Jumolhari, ignoring local beliefs that view Jumolhari as sacred and forbid climbing. An avalanche forces him to retreat, injured, into a cave, where he is ultimately saved and helicoptered to hospital. However, as the writing progressed, Clayton explains, “certain concepts relating to Bhutanese Buddhism . . . began to have an effect on the narrative structure itself. These were concepts around time—principally about cyclical or non-linear time structures; around subjectivity; the dream; and the Bhutanese take on the ‘look’ or point-of-view” (219).

The Western hero’s active nature and mastery over his destiny became problematic as Clayton and her Bhutanese writing colleagues discussed Ellis’ karma, the idea that every action had consequences for him and others that could not be gainsaid or avoided. Thus, while Ellis makes “his

linear journey” climbing the mountain, “his actions are observed from another perspective or point-of-view” (220). But whose? The Bhutanese writers were clear that, with their animist-inspired Buddhism, the dominant protagonist was Jumo, the mountain’s guardian deity (indeed, the mountain itself). The script required a split point-of-view, both Ellis’ and “an implied subjectivity from another position” (220). Clayton writes that “we developed the idea that the linear narrative of Ellis’s quest was enveloped . . . by a more complex temporal and point-of-view narrative structure where Ellis’s past and future deeds, and the deeds of others, are perceived as part of the story’s cause-and-effect, and are interpolated by Jumo, the organizing spirit, the dispenser of karma” (220). Given that Ellis does not believe in—and so cannot see—Jumo, the writers needed a device to bring them into contact. Clayton explains that a Bhutanese audience would have no problem seeing a deity on screen, but a secular audience might. As a solution, they set the story in the hospital to which Ellis is taken after his mountain rescue. The interaction between man and deity became a series of dreams that removed him to another level of the narrative in “a more appropriate register” (220). In their final dream meeting, Ellis becomes more object than subject, since “the dreamer in Buddhism *is seen by the dream* . . . and not vice versa” (221; emphasis added). The dream world is literally—not metaphorically—more significant in Buddhist cosmology than the everyday world or *samsara*. “Bhutanese ideas around narrative cause-and-effect,” Clayton concludes, “and the notions of points of view beyond that of the individual hero, seemed to me to offer important challenges to both the classical and the ‘monomyth’ model of mythic storytelling” (221).

Clayton’s experience in Bhutan provides a counterpoint to Yorke’s “natural shape” or “symmetrical arc.” Consider also Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which won the Cannes Film Festival’s 2010 Palme D’Or. Described by Steve Rose in *The Guardian* as “an episodic, non-linear, open-ended head-scratcher,” it hardly constitutes Yorke’s “symmetrical arc” or an inexorable movement toward a satisfying conclusion by way of escalating linear tension or character resolution. “But that’s life, no?” says Weerasethakul. “It’s like tapping into someone’s mind. The thinking

pattern is quite random, jumping here and there like a monkey” (qtd. in Rose). This monkey-like leaping around hardly constitutes Yorke’s linear narrative that is the “natural by-product of how we order the world.” Of course, Weerasethakul’s work might equally be described in relation to modernist narrative styles with their streams of consciousness, questionable subjectivity, and open endings—what Peter Brooks describes as the “‘crisis’ in the understanding of plots and plotting brought about by the advent of Modernism” (238)—and I would agree. Indeed the modernist aesthetic—if I can so simplify it for the purposes of this essay—reacts to the closures of such strangled linear narrative. Even more reason, then, to question the reductive narrative structures described in the majority of the practical writing guides on offer. Tom McCarthy notes a “naïve and uncritical realism dominating contemporary middlebrow fiction[.]. . . . [a] doctrine of authenticity peddled by creative writing classes the world over” (21).⁸ My merging of film and prose fiction is deliberate. Although my focus has been on prose fiction, film—specifically big budget American film—has come to dominate narratives on plot, as we shall see. Many practical guides blur the boundaries between the two mediums, and CW includes screenwriting among its taught forms.

Yorke’s text might be considered a soft target—an over-simplistic work for a popular market. However, as managing director of a major UK production company that produces successful British television series, the previous Head of Channel Four Drama and Controller of BBC Drama Productions, and founder of the BBC Writers Academy (an important breeding ground for upcoming screenwriters), he is a leading arbiter of cultural capital. Nonetheless, let us consider a more serious canonical contender in CW’s pantheon of craft guides: Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. Oddly enough, Booker also begins with *Beowulf* and *Jaws*. “Are we to assume that the author of *Jaws*, Peter Benchley, had in some way been influenced by *Beowulf*?” he asks.

Of course not. . . . In *our modern civilization* . . . at any given moment, *all over the world*, hundreds of millions of people will be engaged in [telling stories]. . . . *We* spend a phenomenal amount of our lives following stories . . . fictional stories play

such a significant role in *our lives*, as novels or plays, films or operas, comic strips or TV soaps. . . . *We* take it for granted that the great storytellers, such as Homer and Shakespeare, should be among the most famous people who ever lived . . . even when *we* look out from our own world into space, *we* find that we have named many of the most conspicuous heavenly bodies—Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Perseus, Andromeda—after characters from stories. (2–4; emphasis added)

Booker appropriates the first person plural and initially suggests that he speaks for “our modern civilisation . . . all over the world,” yet he focuses almost solely on European and American narratives. Whatever “our” modern civilization may be—his “we” is universal—certainly the “we” who named the heavenly bodies constitute a global minority. Booker may have been helped by a bibliography that included George Dumézil’s monumental body of work on comparative Indo-European mythology since *The Seven Basic Plots* remains seemingly blindly rooted in the Indo-European narrative and mythological paradigm. It also ignores modernist narrative paradigms, as do all of my examples cited in this section. Thus, Booker’s text does not successfully make an argument for archetypal storytelling strategies any more than Yorke’s.

Ruth Page’s discussion of variations in storytelling style among Maori and white schoolchildren in New Zealand cites William Labov’s work on narrative style. Labov posits this storytelling model: Abstract-Orientation-Complicating Action-Evaluation-Resolution-Coda. However, Page finds that this model does not apply directly to Maori schoolchildren’s storytelling, at least in the earlier stages of participation in the national school system (before they become “schooled”), especially in terms of narrative closure and evaluation. Page suggests Maori storytelling is more often described as an ongoing practice; stories pass from speaker to speaker, include shared, implicit knowledge and short story components, and frequently lack story resolution. This means that the stories often seem unfinished to non-Maori listeners. Page contends that “[t]he apparent open-endedness of [Maori English] storytelling stands in marked contrast to [the dominant English] narratives which

appear much closer to the Labovian pattern with a clearly marked beginning, middle and end *so typical of European North American stories*" (155; emphasis added). Thus narrative structure may come in far wider a variety of forms than those discussed by Yorke and Booker.

All of which brings us to Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, surely the most influential work on narrative structure in the CW craft canon and beyond. Campbell describes the "hero's quest" as an essential global "monomyth" (a term, ironically enough, that he borrowed from the modernist masterwork *Finnegan's Wake*). Campbell summarizes the monomyth (and I fold in Labov's model):

[A] hero ventures forth from the *world of common day* [Point of Orientation] into a region of supernatural wonder: *fabulous forces are there encountered* [Complicating Action] and *a decisive victory is won* [through Evaluation, i.e. better understanding the enemy/situation]; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man [Resolution]. (23; emphasis added)

The hero, I might add, also lives happily ever after (which corresponds to Labov's Coda). This is Yorke's "symmetrical," linear arc. Campbell's work is indebted to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which set the tone for the so-called comparative method in anthropology and folklore studies. As Frazer notes in his short book *Passages of the Bible Chosen for Their Literary Beauty and Interest*, he acts so "that a service might be rendered to lovers of good literature by *disengaging these gems from their setting*" (qtd. in Manganaro 48; emphasis added). Campbell adopts this aesthetic disengagement. He delineates universality to draw his own (aesthetic) conclusions, which are innately ahistorical, and constructs a diachronous deductive cacophony of voices that elicits his own consciousness as much as any grand truth. As Marc Manganaro writes, everything, when viewed through the lens of the comparative method, becomes "a well-wrought urn that stands outside of process" (49).

Comparativism in anthropology was killed off by participant observation and the growth of the monograph. In 1934, Ruth Benedict wrote that "[c]omparative ethnological volumes . . . build up a kind of me-

chanical Frankenstein's monster with a right eye from Fiji, a left from Europe, one leg from Tierra del Fuego, and one from Tahiti, and all the fingers and toes from still different regions. Such a figure corresponds to no reality in the past or present" (49). Anthropologist Muriel Crespi describes Campbell's "ethnocentrism" and "analytic level" as "so abstract and devoid of ethnographic context that myth loses the very meanings supposed to be embedded in the 'hero'" (1104). Comparativism, however, embedded itself in literature and folklore studies. This from a description of an English Studies conference in India in 2012:

The oral telling/re-telling of myths/legends/narratives was marked by inventiveness as well as considerable improvisation *even though the basic narrative frame would remain the same*. James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) have remarkably demonstrated ritualistic and *archetypal patterns* in representative narratives from different parts of the world. (MELUS MELOW; emphasis added)

How is it that such discredited perspectives should linger on in CW and wider circles? Perhaps, as Manganaro suggests,

[t]he powers of Frazerian comparativism are inextricably tied to the allure of the literary; the anthropological and the aesthetic functioning symbiotically within a grand stratagem of control. For an anthropologist like Frazer, for example, the use of a "literary" style ultimately became a defence, when faced with attacks on theories and methodology, that his texts were artistic creations. (17)

They certainly are not used as such now. Universalizing comparativism has been out of fashion for decades in anthropology yet remains present in CW guides. Like astrology or fascism, the comparativist method proves a malleable heuristics suggesting much, yet dangerous for its tendency to close an argument, to seem to solve and, in the process, reduce. Even the strongest advocates of Dumézil's (Francophone) work suggest that "perhaps" it might extend beyond the Indo-European area

(Finnegan 32). However, as Robert Ellwood succinctly observes in his critical work on Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and Carl Jung, “a tendency to think in generic terms of people, races . . . is undoubtedly the profoundest flaw in mythological thinking” (28). The same might be said of the universalizing tendency in the majority of CW practical guides and, arguably, what is implied in much of CW’s wider perspective on the nature of writing itself.

As poet C. P. Nield notes, Campbell’s work “has had an incalculable impact on the Western world through its adoption by Hollywood and the mass entertainment industry.” American cinema accounted for around sixty-four percent of global cinema receipts in 2012 (Hoad)—a statistic of limited value, given DVD sales, online views, and other media, of course, but nonetheless an indication of its continuing influence on the international cultural economy. Moretti’s analysis of cinema in twenty-four countries between 1986–95 shows that “American films make up between 75 and 90 percent of the decade’s top hits” (“Planet” 93), although his analysis excludes China and India. The hero’s quest, merged as it is so completely into craft and guides and big budget American cinema, bestrides the globalizing world. George Lucas’ adoption of the Campbell monomyth in *Star Wars* and Christopher Vogler’s reconstruction of that monomythic narrative paradigm for Hollywood executives is too well-travelled a tale to repeat. It is easy to see how Campbell’s comparativist anthropological “universal archetype of the monomyth” might breed blind piety, with its tempting one-stop key and readability. In the spectacle and simple solutions of the hero’s quest, mass conversion becomes all too easy. Manganaro writes:

The comparativist text . . . encourages multiple weldings of seeming contraries (literature and anthropology), as the encyclopaedic tendency to move outward is complemented by the urge toward fusion and thus becomes *a way of extending one’s grasp*. . . . A profusion of voices may stand out as diversity, but they ultimately move toward the system or idea that unites, *destroying variation in the process*. (17; emphasis added)

“McMyth,” in Nield’s dry description. An historically and culturally un-self-referential CW risks propagating a cultural uniformity redolent of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s culture industry that undermines (perhaps “destroys” is a tad harsh) variation and experimental potential. The argument often made against CW programs—that they lead to bland, standardized “workshop fiction” (as McGurl suggests in *Program*, for instance)—becomes, in a global arena, a potentially far more serious threat to local or indigenous literary form and craft as well as the cultural heterogeneity of global creative writing in all forms. Remove the heart from how a people tell their stories, transplant another’s, and you create new, alien rhythms, a Baudrillardian simulacra that can lead to global entropic uniformity. Adorno and Horkheimer write that “[u]nder monopoly, all mass culture is identical” (149). A melodramatic overstatement, perhaps, but one with which to take CW’s highly culturally and historically particular pedagogical and craft models on into the next section. Let us now look at the subject’s arrival in China.

IV. China

During a brief period of “opening up” in the 1980s, Chinese universities introduced a number of writing degrees, all of which were subsequently banned by the government (Jose). Alexander Kuo believes that “the first creative writing course taught in a Hong Kong university occurred in 1996 at Baptist University, and the first in China in 2005 in Beijing Forestry University.” Certainly, CW arrived in mainland China on the back of English language training courses (Dai, “Creative Writing”). Since 2006, modules have run at Sun Yat Sen, Renmin, and Sichuan Universities as well as Wuhan University (Kroll and Dai 81). Despite the contested issues of linguistic imperialism involved with English-language tuition, one might nonetheless suggest that CW taught as part of an English course implicitly better recognizes its Anglophone cultural particularity. Hong Kong CW lecturer Eddie Tay notes that, for many Chinese CW students in Hong Kong, at least, “the English language is viewed [not as an imperial language so much] as a space of possibility and emergence” (103), a space free of the suffocating nationalistic embargoes of Chinese. My focus is on new CW courses in Chinese

languages, principally Mandarin. Fan Dai credits author Zecheng Xu as one of the founders of Chinese-language CW instruction in mainland China (“English-Language” 22). Xu spent 2009 as writer-in-residence at Creighton University and, in 2010, attended Iowa’s International Writing Program. In 2009, the Research Centre for Literature and Creative Writing was established at Shanghai University, although Fudan offered the first Master’s program in Chinese-language CW in 2009. Since then, Nanjing, Zhejiang, and Peking have all established Chinese-language units or programs (Dai, “Creative Writing”).

Diao Keli at Renmin University “translated from English two of the four books in the first creative writing series ever published in China” (Dai, “Creative Writing”). The four texts were Dorothea Brande’s seminal *Becoming a Writer*, Jerry Cleaver’s *Immediate Fiction: A Complete Writing Course*, and two works in the series *Now Write!, Fiction Writing Exercises From Today’s Best Writers and Teachers* and *Nonfiction: Memoir, Journalism and Creative Nonfiction Exercises From Today’s Best Writers*. Since then, Renmin University of China Press has published or is in the process of publishing about twenty writing craft books, “mostly translations from English” (Dai, “Creative Writing”).⁹ Cleaver’s *Immediate Fiction* is promoted on his website as the “bestselling writing book in China.”¹⁰ The only three non-Anglophone authors mentioned in the work are Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, and Gustave Flaubert. Of the forty-three authors referenced in the index, thirty are American. The one non-American still living is John le Carré. The other non-Americans are Agatha Christie, Joseph Conrad, John Fowles, James Hilton, W. Somerset Maugham, John Milton, Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde. One, at least, is female. All of the authors referenced are white. The second paragraph of the introduction begins: “The craft and technique of *Immediate Fiction* are those used by *all great writers*” (ix; emphasis added). Later, Cleaver asserts that “craft is neutral” (13). He writes that “in its purest form a story is just three elements: conflict, action, resolution. . . . CONFLICT + ACTION + RESOLUTION = STORY” (25–26). I hardly need spell out the scale of such bias that is packaged as neutral craft used by “all great writers.” This is the “bestselling writing book in China.” *Now Write! Fiction*, a collection written

almost exclusively by American MFA and writing workshop tutors, contains sections on point of view, character development, dialogue, plot and pacing, setting and description, and craft that are almost identical to early twentieth-century American practical writing guides with their focus on character types, plot and structure, conflict, action, setting, and theme.¹¹

Whether taught in a Chinese language or otherwise (more on language shortly), the new programs are modelled on, and draw their practical guides from, craft models that originated in English studies. Shanghai course director Chen Si states: "Many universities in English speaking countries offer this degree, and successful writers such as Bai Xianrong . . . Yan Geqin . . . and Ha Jin . . . all have degrees in creative writing. . . . [W]e are going to hire these writers to teach this course" (qtd. in Zhao). Pham Thi Hong Thanh notes that the classroom passivity born of the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in China (and in Asia more generally) provides a significant issue for the workshop environment given that students "believe that the truth is not found primarily in the self" (qtd. in Kroll and Dai 79). Thus they do not easily engage in peer critique or debate with the authority figure. The workshop model, then, requires significant cultural critique before it is blithely accepted as a viable model for teaching CW in China. Beyond the pedagogical, we must also consider how the workshop might foreground certain types of writing and writers. This is true of the workshop model generally, of course, but when applied to global literary production, the implications become that much more dramatic.

I trust that by now my wider point is made that the American, Iowa model of CW has had a potent presence at least in the very recent development of CW as a taught subject in China. The implications for its effect on literary production will take time to become visible. Andrew Plaks notes that 1919 witnessed the birth of the "modern Chinese novel . . . when the old Chinese novel was consciously rejected by idealistic cultural reformers as an expression of the moribund values and effete culture of the ancient regime, in favour of the new Western narrative model adopted with great fervour" (184). He describes a

thin transitional band stretching over the last decades of Manchu imperial rule, during which time some premature experiments with the new imported *forms* of prose fiction were undertaken, and certain attempts were made to introduce more “modern” story content into narratives presented in the traditional format. In the best cases, we find in late Qing fiction a bit of heady new wine in old bottles, and some mellow old wine in new-fangled containers. (185; emphasis added)

How intoxicating this “heady new” vintage may prove will only become apparent over time.

In the past century, China has undergone one of the world’s most powerful modernizing-nationalizing programs. Whether CW programs in Chinese languages (let us be clear about the plurality) will revisit such “mellow,” “pre-modern” fictional forms is yet to be established. China is home to dozens of languages and cultural and ethnic identities, from the Muslim Uighur to the Mongols, from the Tibetans to the myriad minority ethnic groups of the Yunnan Province. Contested identities and multiplicitous linguistic and creative prose, poetry, and other forms will surely prove as problematic as they are in contested minority representations in the UK, US, and elsewhere in the Global Anglophone North. I hope CW will offer not just a platform for those voices to be heard (“content”), but also for local literary forms and styles to propagate. Enrique Gálvan-Álvarez’s fascinating recent study, for instance, of the four English-language Tibetan novels published thus far offers a glimpse of alternative narrative patterning in Tibetan-written storytelling history. The *gter ma* (or “treasure texts”) constitute a “narrative pattern” that

re-appropriate[s] the authority associated with Buddhist teachers and kings from former times by claiming to have composed or “discovered” texts originally written or inspired by them. The *gter ma* tradition is thus a visionary strategy for presenting new texts and ideas arising from the imagined golden age of Tibetan history. . . . [The] question of agency in the process of *gter ma* writing is . . . complex . . . since . . . the *gter ston* [author] is neither a mere empty channel possessed by the spirit

of a past lama, nor is he said to be contriving the whole process through his own efforts. The *gter ma* tradition was and remains a highly ingenious form of not only introducing novelty within tradition, but also setting up alternative sources of spiritual and scriptural authority. (29)

The recognition and use of such a craft writing model offers an alternative to those CW offers from within its own historical and cultural paradigms.

The institution of CW programs with craft and pedagogical models based on Anglophone English studies offers little space for discovery of other forms and crafts, focused as they are on the accepted forms of the global literary marketplace. Experimentation thus becomes focused solely on content (“heady new wine”) rather than form (be it, for the globalized author, “new-fangled” Chinese containers or even relatively forgotten “old bottles”). While introducing Kojin Karatani’s *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Fredric Jameson notes that as Japanese novels evolve, “the raw experience of Japanese social experience and the abstract formal patterns of Western novel construction cannot always be welded seamlessly together” (xiii). Moretti also observes that complicated problems arise “from the encounter of western form and Japanese . . . reality” (“Conjectures” 58). Embedded within such a culture clash are issues relating to language, literature, and power. As Pascale Casanova shows, dominant canonical literatures from certain culture-languages invite imitation and aspiration. “Certain authors,” he contends, “writing in ‘small’ languages have been tempted to introduce within their own national tongue not only the techniques, but even the sounds of a reputedly literary language” (18). Thus CW, in its propagation of established Anglophone, certainly Western (I use the term as its consumers might) literary forms, participates in this kind of cultural imperialism and hegemonizing. Experimentation might be the correct word for a budding Chinese author new to stream of consciousness in a CW class, perhaps, but CW nonetheless risks failing to revitalize its own centre by “bringing back” new forms and craft devices. Moretti fittingly posits a “*law of literary evolution*: in cultures that belong to the periphery of the

literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside of Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" ("Conjectures" 58; emphasis in original). However, "the import of foreign novels doesn't just mean that people read a lot of foreign books, it also means that local writers become uncertain of how to write their own novels" (Moretti, "Planet" 105). This is what Masao Miyoshi describes for Japan as "an impossible programme" (4) and Roberto Schwarz labels "dissonance" or "compositional defects" (41). Nonetheless, the agency of the resisting, critical author is not in question, merely the uncritically interrogated formal elements of CW pedagogy as they travel out into the wider world. As Moretti stresses,

every now and then one of those impossible programmes *works* . . . the clash of symbolic power of Western Europe produces major paradigm shifts, like the Russian novels of ideas, or Latin American magical realism (or the slightly different case of the Kafka-Joyce generation). Although these remain *exceptions*, they occur often enough to show a counter force at work within the world literary system. ("Planet" 106; emphasis added)

V. The Programmatic and Beyond

"Every now and then" is surely not good enough. Are the storytellers themselves to become instruments of Hall's Gramscian hegemonized globalism? Will CW participate in a blind, liberal globalization that flattens all toward a global literary economic and cultural centre (even if, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, that centre can no longer confidently be situated geographically)? The most obvious manifestations of that centre hold great appeal, of course: Hollywood, J. K. Rowling millions, Nobel-Prize-for-Literature-winning speeches, the Booker. As Huggan notes, drawing on Hugh Eakin, "the Booker [Prize], despite its 'multicultural consciousness', has arguably done less to further the development of 'non-Western' and/or postcolonial literatures than it has to 'encourage the commerce of an "exotic" commodity

catered to the Western literary market” (Huggan 105). Yet the allure of that market! The spectacle! How is an indigenous, long-poetic narrative form, for instance, born of an oral storytelling tradition—doomed in print to sell a few hundred copies locally at best—to compete with that? Pulitzer Prize-winning international writers jet in for semester-long writer-in-residence positions. Practical writing guides explain craft devices using literary examples from successful Program Era graduates, the guides written by the same. The “exotic” authors who win Bookers might elaborate exotic content, far less often formal innovation. Meanwhile, the workshop—seemingly so naturalized, so fundamental a pedagogic principle, so universal—proves to be a highly culturally particular critical-pedagogical environment that is *uncritically* applied to local contexts.

Global CW needs to speak not of craft per se, but of options and alternatives as broadly expressed as possible. As Kroll and Dai suggest, a “heightened awareness of how social and cultural contexts affect writing and reading practices must alter the way in which teachers construct assignments and choose course content” (78). Many teaching practitioners do precisely that, of course. It is a shame that so few practical guides seem to follow suit. It is imperative that CW express itself in a more nuanced and culturally sensitive manner, especially in its practical guides. Why? Because, as I hope I have shown, it currently risks enacting a subtle neo-imperialist creep out into the wider world with its programmatic pedagogical models and eye toward the orthodox macro-corporate literary market—Sarah Brouillette’s transnational, corporate, conglomerated publishing industry (vii). Jane Camens of Asia Pacific Writers and Translators (APWT) notes that “most of the writers [she] met in Asia who were writing in English aspired to have their work published in North America or Britain” (276). Her reference to writers working in English is critical to the issues in this essay, although I only have space to touch on it. Since language “forms a major component of literary capital, certain languages, by virtue of the prestige of the texts written in them, are reputed to be more literary than others, to embody literature” (Casanova 17). How to wrestle such prestige away? Determinedly refute the dominant language of the global literary marketplace? Embrace it?

In his well-trodden debate with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe argues that a writer should "aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and *able to carry his peculiar experience*" (82; emphasis added). Can CW involve itself in contesting established forms, styles, and crafts to help better "carry" that experience?

The literary marketplace invokes a notion of audience that is equally complex and contested. APWT's recent development of a World Reader's Award is an interesting case in point. Their website explains:

The world's authors are creating work for the wrong audience. Every week, tens of thousands of manuscripts and screenplays arrive on desks in the US and the UK. But that's not where the readers are. . . . Three out of five members of humanity lives in Asia. By 2050, 75 percent of the human race will be in Asia and Africa. If you want to succeed in the creative industries, simply write for the world's readers. ("Are We")

Perhaps the readership is changing in the global literary marketplace. However, Hardt and Negri's imperialist power diffusion evokes a cultural (even if no longer geographical) power centre that, for my purposes, fully retains its Anglophone Global Northern characteristics. The World Reader Award winner receives "help towards finding a publisher who will sign a contract for print, e-book, movie and game rights," since while "the printed book business may be suffering in the West . . . it's still growing in the East, and the need for great narratives is expanding worldwide as the markets for modern fiction formats grow, from e-books to movies to games to graphic novels" ("Are We"). A new audience, the same literary forms, and no critical discourse on craft. Cultural capital, Huggan points out (building on Bourdieu), "is transmitted, acquired and accumulated through a complex process of legitimation negotiated through the interactions between the producers and consumers of symbolic goods [here, literature]" (4). As Bourdieu writes, "what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer" (42). Writer and audience participate in the same process of legitimation. When CW travels beyond the bounda-

ries of its origins, bringing with it culturally particular literary forms, craft devices, and pedagogical models, it imposes certain types of cultural capital on the local, a form of cultural imperialism that threatens the potential for formal and stylistic experimentation.

Not all the news is bad. And it is far from my intention to question human agency. As Brouillette recognizes, writers engage in a complex process of “indulging, resisting and critiquing” their imagined market (viii). Not all are committed to the market as the best or only form of literary dissemination, of course (even if Samuel Johnson did think any writer not in it for the money a “blockhead”). For Arjun Appadurai, “[t]he critical point is that both sides of the coin of global cultural process today are products of *the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference* on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures” (“Disjuncture” 308; emphasis added).

Globalization is a “world of things” with “different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations, or societies” (Appadurai, *Modernity* 4). When I read IWW graduate and City University Hong Kong writer in residence Marilyn Chin’s comment that she “[o]nce . . . blended the epigrams of Horace with the Haiku of Basho and came up with a strange brew of didacticism and pure image, which made a powerful political statement,” I see the potential for formal innovation that such a transcultural aesthetics makes possible. Indeed, it might well be argued that poetry has done more than other literary forms in seeking out crafts from every global quarter (Jerome Rothenberg’s “ethnopoetics” in *Technicians of the Sacred*, for example, constitute a genuine interrogation into the unique, rather than the comparativist, splendours of global poetic forms). The haiku enriches poetry and illustrates that English literature is not solely ethnocentric. Sociolinguistics and anthropology argue for awareness of variation in narrative structures (that narratology is not part of all CW teaching seems scandalous). In a 2010 blog, Myers writes: “I believe that creative writing ought to return to its original model. Literary criticism and even literary scholarship ought to be integrated into the writing of stories, poems, and memoirs”

("Against"). Myers recognizes CW's origins and limits and seeks to make them explicit.

CW needs to clearly articulate its origins and epistemological particularity in all its teaching materials and textbooks. In her discussion of Maori literacy instruction in New Zealand state schools, Page notes how "narrative styles [come to] appear necessarily constrained at the price of academic progress . . . with potential consequences for the student's sense of cultural identity and right to express themselves" (177). CW must not unwittingly participate in a similar process through foregrounding craft practices it deems universal, yet which are highly culturally particular. The as yet limited evidence from China suggests this risk, as I have shown.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair believes that, in South Asia, "the great intellectual revolutions of the 21st century are likely to arise out of the struggles of various disadvantaged groups and communities to enter the literacy stakes and insert their own texts" (10–11). If CW is almost solely focused on the global literary marketplace and tends toward propagating the kinds of culturally particular craft devices I have described, then it serves not as an aid to such intellectual revolution but rather as a hindrance. Among many interesting "impractical" tips, Nair suggests we should "[h]ave the courage to admit those who are formally illiterate into the great box of the Asian academy, not necessarily as learners only but as *teachers*" (17; emphasis added). Nair's suggestion, which intersects productively with debates around orality, the spoken word, and literary status,¹² remains revolutionary. "How can we as writers, readers and academics," she asks, "learn from vital oral traditions of knowledge and performance when conceptualizing creative courses in Asia?" (11). This is a useful question for CW tutors, guide writers, and theorists to keep in mind, not simply in relation to "oral" traditions but to all traditions of knowledge and performance they encounter.

Such a warning, of course, has the tendency to deny the writer agency. In his analysis of "the encounter of western forms and local reality" ("Conjectures" 62), however, Moretti remains far from uniformly gloomy. It "did indeed produce everywhere a structural compromise [but] the compromise itself was taking rather different forms"

("Conjectures" 62). Indeed, CW should keep in mind that all craft or formal instruction should be culturally and historically contextualized, but what Moretti describes as the "constriction" of foreign form can also give rise to "rather different forms" in the always active and reactive writer. CW should be on the lookout for such innovation and experimentation, hoping to both participate in its free evolution and feed back such innovation into the grand corpus of CW studies. In a globalized or globalizing twenty-first century world, my argument risks sounding like that of a Victorian armchair anthropologist bemoaning the loss of pure, pre-Lapsarian cultures. However, as my examples from Bhutan, China, and Tibet illustrate, there remains much to enrich and challenge craft devices within established literary forms of storytelling and potentially even the extent of literary forms themselves. For CW to be unaware of such local potential would be disappointing at best and at worst destructively homogenizing. Instead of bringing back new forms, new principles of storytelling from "elsewhere" to fertilize CW's "centre," the subject risks formalizing English studies paradigms globally.

CW programs offer much to the new global bourgeoisie—and why not? Yet let them seek out new form and craft as well as technique, new teachers as well as students. This might relate to the translation of oral texts to "writing" (and the subject's very name provides its own challenge here), or it might relate to other forms of that creative endeavour that uses words as its base material. It would be terrible for a subject with its heart so firmly in the celebration of human creative expression to become the instrument of a subtle yet invidious programmatic cultural imperialism.

Notes

- 1 This section draws heavily on several excellent critical histories detailing CW's development as a taught subject in the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. These include Myers' *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996) and McGurl's *The Program Era* (2008) for the US, Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005) for Australia (which includes a convincing critique of Myers' work), and Wandor's *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (2008) and O'Rourke's *Creative Writing: Education, Culture and Community* (2005) for the UK. I have found none to match for Canada.

- 2 In a forthcoming paper, tentatively titled “Socialist Creative Writing Programs: Cold War Alternatives to the Programmatic,” I will discuss the few places where CW developed entirely autonomously to the Anglophone model discussed in this paper.
- 3 There have been a number of works on the development of CW programs alongside the rise of theory. It would take too long to summarize these arguments. Although relevant, they are not vital to the essence of my argument. See Dawson, *Humanities* 122 and passim; Gibbons; Harris; Melrose; and Ramey.
- 4 Wilbers notes that, in 1975, of the fifteen CW programs offering M.F.A.s, nine were founded by IWW graduates, and of the thirty-two offering M.A.s, half were founded by IWW graduates.
- 5 See Whitehead, “Nomadic Emergence.”
- 6 Detailing *Beowulf*’s influence on the contemporary imagination goes far beyond the remit of this essay. However, see Jones’ *Strange Likeness* and the collection of essays *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* edited by Clark and Perkins.
- 7 Artamonova’s essay provides an excellent elaboration of the part *Beowulf* played in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth.
- 8 By “doctrine of authenticity,” McCarthy means the nineteenth-century notion of realism reflecting an authentic version of the real world.
- 9 Dai notes that more are due and some “will be craft-related books by Chinese writers,” which will prove a fascinating development for the broader discourse that I hope might develop from the publication of this essay.
- 10 I have been unable to verify this statement independently; I received no response to my enquiries with Renmin UP.
- 11 See, for instance: Grabo’s *The Art of the Short Story*; Neal’s *Short Stories in the Making*; and Barrett’s *Short Story Writing*.
- 12 See, for instance, Fowler’s “Publishing Manchester.”

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